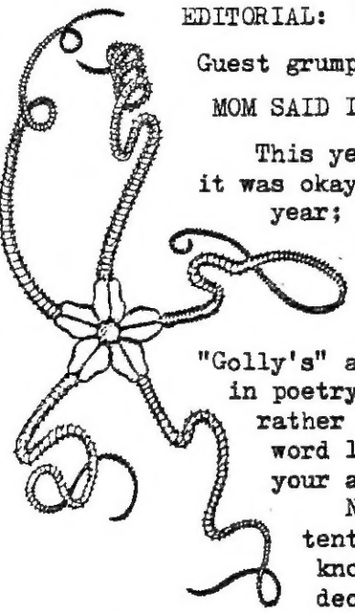
CHEAP TRUTH 5



EDITORIAL: "Exploring a 21st Century Pop Ideology"

Guest grump Sue Denim vents her spleen on the crop of '83:

MOM SAID IT WAS OKAY

This year's Nebula ballot looked like a list of stuff that Mom and Dad said it was okay to read. Mom and Dad really liked Connie Willis' "Firewatch" last year; it's about this student that gets all self-righteous and rebellious and everything, but it turned out Father knows best after all.

This year Mom and Dad really like STARTIDE RISING by David Brin and Greg Benford's AGAINST INFINITY. STARTIDE RISING especially; I mean, this is the kind of writing Mom and Dad grew up on, full of "Golly's" and blushes and grins. And aren't those dolphins cute? They talk in poetry that sounds like it came right out of READER'S DIGEST. They'd rather hear that somebody "muttered an oath" or came out with some made-up word like "Ifni!" than be told that they really said "shit" or "shove it up your ass, motherfucker."

No sex, of course, or maybe just a noise in the night in somebody else's tent. And it has a nice moral, too -- something Mom and Dad have always known, though it hasn't always seemed that way these last couple of decades -- that we are better than they are, and that's enough to pull us out of any trouble, particularly when they are slimy alien scum.

The Benford book is scary in spots -- this Ganymede place they're trying to fix up seems almost real in places, and this terraforming isn't anything like the way Uncle Frank went about fixing up his cabin by the lake. But everything's okay, because the hero, Manuel (isn't that a foreign name?) is everything they would want a son of theirs to be: a perfect neutered little adult. He doesn't curse or masturbate or even think about girls.

As for that weird alien artifact, well, if we can't understand it, we can always try and kill it. That seems like a good, level-headed approach.

Mom and Dad like Kim Stanley Robinson's "Black Air" for novelette. It's so nice to read a straightforward historical story, like that Frank G. Slaughter used to write, and it's just too bad that he had to tack on that fantasy mumbo jumbo at the end just so he could sell it. But then that nice Joanna Russ did the same thing last year with "Souls," and isn't it nice that she's not mad any more and writing unpleasant books like THE FEMALE MAN?

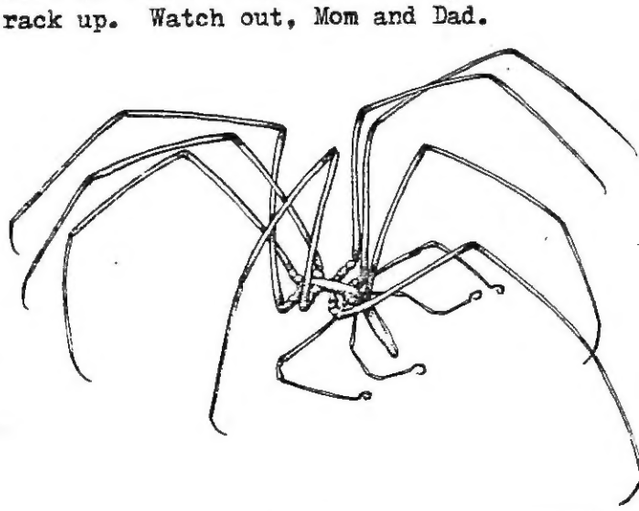
Mom and Dad are looking forward to the 1984 Nebulas, because they're sure that nice Mr. Robinson is going to be up for their favorite book so far this year, THE WILD SHORE. They like to see the old stories, and what could be more comfortable and familiar than living on the farm after they drop the Big One? Nope, nothing scary here. The hero tried to tell Mom and Dad that he's not a virgin, but they know better. He never seems that interested in sex anyway.

Mostly they like the ending, where Henry discovers that he is a Writer. It seems to agonize him terribly to write, but he is so wonderfully sensitive. And Mom and Dad love the moral of the book, which is just like that Judy Garland movie: "There's no place like home."

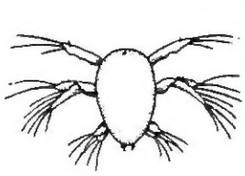
Maybe the people who vote for the Nebulas are still afraid of their Moms and Dads; maybe they're not Moms and Dads themselves. That would explain why they don't vote for books with real ideas and real sex and real language in them.

And yes, Mom and Dad, there were still books like that being written, even in 1983. John Calvin Batchelor wrote one called THE BIRTH OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF ANTARCTICA that was not only real SF but real literature, at one and the same time. Rudy Rucker's THE SEX SPHERE is witty and stylish and takes on sexual stereotyping with breathtaking candor. Even Paul Preuss, whose BROKEN SYMMETRIES tries hard to be a soap opera and a spy story, still makes big league points about the way politicians use scientists and people use each other.

These people are going to keep writing this sort of book no matter how many Nebulas Brin and Robinson and their ilk manage to rack up. Watch out, Mom and Dad. They're out to get you.



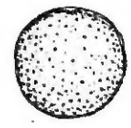
CHEAP TRUTH. 809-C West 12th Street. Austin, Texas 78701. NOT COPYRIGHTED. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. "All Power to the Imagination"



SF AND ROCK VIDEOS

While other media have made fantastic leaps in power and distribution, publishing remains a smokestack industry. Now word processors and videotex media have arrived: rude intrusions into the ivied halls of literary culture.

These new technologies are pantingly ready to lay rude hands on the lilied flesh of literature, and the resulting indecencies are extremely promising opportunities for SF. Straight literature has never taken technology seriously, and as a result it has lobotomized itself. As it flounders in an increasingly senile search for its audience, its vigorous bastard child, science fiction, might conceivably lead this technological revolution and make itself the dominant mode of literary expression in the 21st century. We owe it to ourselves to try.



We can learn from another successful synthesis of art and technology: 20th century pop music.

There has been a long alliance between SF and pop music, from the jazz of the '40's and '50's through to today's hi-tech rock. These despised genres have fermented happily together over several decades, borrowing one another's audiences and terminologies. ("New Wave" for one: a term drawn from SF and applied to rock through the mutual tradition of fanzines.)

Now, through the new art form of rock videos, we are confronted with a blazingly vigorous new medium that exploits a host of new technologies to dazzling effect. Consider the list: electric guitars, synthesizers, recording technology, video cameras, satellite transmission, cable, and television, all dedicated to the noble effort to blow the mind of today's youth. Is it any wonder that that parents clamor for grotesque "lock-boxes" to keep their kids from mainlining MTV twelve hours a day? These are the same archetypal parents who have been tossing out boxes of comics and rocket-ship books for the past fifty years, for identical motives.

Recently we have been treated to the appalling spectacle of SF figures allying themselves with the forces of reaction. "Kids don't read any more," they whine. The kids are down the street popping quarters into videogames instead of publishers' pockets; they're home watching MTV. What should writers and publishers learn from this?

A sense of shame. Why aren't kids lined up eight deep for the latest issue of ISAAC ASIMOV'S? Why isn't ANALOG doled out from locked crates by frowning members of the PTA? Because they are DULL. Worse than dull: they're reactionary, clinging to literary-culture values while a cybernetic tsunami converts our times into a post-industrial Information Age.

It is little wonder that rock videos, like Napoleon, have pulled SF's crown from the gutter and placed it on their own heads. Movement, excitement, color, reckless visionary drive: you will find these in abundance in the work of video directors and bands raised from birth on SF. Consequently they are producing not only excellent SF but SF often better than that in the written media.

Consider a work like Culture Club's KARMA CHAMELEON, an irresistable alternate history where 19th century blacks and whites frolic together under the benevolent aegis of transvestite Rastafarianism. As social statement, this blows away the pallid efforts of modern SF's white-bread legions of feminists and libertarians.

Has there ever been an adolescent power fantasy to compare with Billy Idol's DANCING WITH MYSELF, where the apotheosis of vicious teenage angst capers under the flaming eyes of Oktobriana, lust-goddess of the Soviet pornographic underground? Or a fantasy pastorale with the vividness of SAFETY DANCE by Men Without Hats, with its subtly monstrous combination of 18th century gypsy merriment and the ominous whine of banks of synthesizers?

Already rock videos have seized the imagination of SF's golden-age audience of 14-year-olds. SF is missing out on this action for very real and cogent reasons. The problem is not the purported illiteracy of today's decadent youth, but their sheer lack of interest in a genre sleepwalking its way into the middle-aged pipe-and-slippers confort of the NEW YORK TIMES Bestseller List.

The graying of SF has left it with a cadre of established writers who are rightfully reaping the harvest of years of dedication. But we must not be misled into thinking this a sign of robust health. It is to a great extent the result of a cultural power vacuum created by the abject collapse of straight literature. Unless SF acts now to recapture its sparkle, we may expect a crippling long-term drain of future writers. Today's young visionaries will ignore SF's inbred tail-chasing for the wide-open spaces of video.

This is a challenge akin to those of other smokestack industries: a crying need to re-think, re-tool, and adapt to the modern era. SF has one critical advantage: it is still a pop industry which is close to its audience. It is not yet wheezing in the iron lung of English departments or begging for government Medicare through arts grants.

SF has always preached the inevitability of change. Physician, heal thyself.